

The Dancing Night
By Dorian Stone

My mother wasn't herself that summer. Normally, she was a free spirit. Her long hair was always a sorted mess with a few dreadlocks poking out between wooden beads from the underside of her copper mop. I never called her "mom" like most kids; she preferred to be called by her nickname, "Charla."

I didn't have the typical influence most kids experienced, with an expectation that they not repeat mistakes made by their parents in their own youth. Nope, that was more like what my grandparents expected of Charla. To this day, they still address her as "Charlotte," which I know she doesn't like. So, she encouraged me to follow my dreams and experience as much of life as I can. "Life is short," she would say. So, Charla had done what she loved and it showed. She created art and did divination with tarot cards for a variety of clients. She would greet them in loosely flowing clothes, dangle bracelets, and hoop earrings.

Though that particular day, Charla stood against the kitchen counter rinsing dishes that had been wrapped in newspaper. Boxes, open and closed, were scattered and stacked around the modest home. She almost looked normal with her hair in a fat ponytail, wearing beat up jeans and a blue t-shirt I'd never seen before. Yet, her movements were forced, her eyes were dark underneath, and she had a red mark at the base of her neck. She looked at me, pretending like it was any other day, as she dried her hands with a dishcloth.

"What's up, Sunshine? Did you get your clothes unpacked?"

"No, but I found my game-station," I responded from the connected living room.

Charla only laughed. She gestured at me and I knew she wanted to sit and talk outside, as we so often had in the city. The wooden front porch creaked as we walked on it. Tree trunks

stood as pillars in every direction and the fresh pine air filled my nose and lungs. An annoying buzz from cicadas was in the air. There were very few neighboring homes, but there was an occupant in the house across the road. She was standing still in her window, with gray hair and a fragile hand on the glass.

Charla leaned back on her elbows and stretched her long legs out over the steps. There was a pause that made my heart skip. “We’re gonna be okay here,” she said, though she didn’t seem to believe it. *How did she always know what I was thinking?*

“Are we safe here?” I asked the question after the answer.

“Yeah, I think so.” Her eyes swelled with water and she looked away.

I knew I had to ask the hard question. She waited for it. “Are we going to see Dad again?”

She sat up and patted me on the knee. “Nope,” she said. She put her arm around me and gave me a sideways hug. “You okay with that?”

I swallowed and let out a sigh. “Yep.”

That made her smile.

Even at that age, I knew when a conversation was over. “Can we get pizza delivered?”

“Pizza, huh?”

I nodded like a bobblehead. We’d never ordered pizza that I could recall. Charla liked food that was “real.”

“Go for it.” She winked. “Get olives on it.”

I jettied inside to find a delivery phone number, but Charla stayed outside until the order came. When she brought it in the house, she opened the lid before the box hit the counter. My stomach growled in response to the strong odor. I discovered the reason Charla never ordered

pizza. It dripped with oil and was heavy in my stomach. Its wheat crust stuck between my teeth and left a salty coating on my tongue. Still, we ate a big part of it.

Through the drupeless windows, it was darker outside than I was accustomed to. Some interesting lights floated in and around the dirt road.

“Are those fireflies?” I asked.

Charla turned and stared. “No. Those are too big. Fireflies are much smaller and kind of flicker in small groups. I don’t know what those are.” She went to the door and put her hand on the knob. “Stay here.” When she opened the door, silence swept in.

Naturally, I went to the couch to watch through the window. The neighbor was looking out hers as well, just as she had been before. I watched as the illuminated bubbles floated in the road. Charla approached them cautiously. She stretched out her hands and, to my surprise, one of the cantaloupe-size lights seemed to respond to her. Her eyes closed and the muscles in her face and shoulders relaxed. Her hands were cupped upward, with the light floating on top of them. She brought it closer to her face, and a light yellow glow brightened her features and lit up her eyelashes. She simply stood there, taking one deep breath after the next.

I don’t know how much time passed. I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew, Charla was waking me up.

“Sunshine, get in bed.”

My mother looked a little better. Her cheeks were pink with color and the bags under her eyes were much lighter.

“What are they?”

“The lights? I don’t know. I’ll ask our neighbor tomorrow. She’ll probably know.”

“What was it like?”

“It was warm,” she said. “Now off to bed with you.”

As promised, the next morning Charla went to greet the neighbor. I observed as they chatted with each other just beyond a small fence. The older lady was short and wore a knitted sweater in the sunshine. I could hear that she had a high giggle, like that of a young child. When my mother returned, she said the neighbor’s name was “Maggie,” and that she may be a little senile. The only thing Maggie offered her about the incident was that she thought it was “a lovely romance.”

We spent that day emptying most of the boxes. Charla’s movements were more natural now and she spoke in a smooth rhythm. At dusk, she pulled out her hair band and we both sat and gazed out at the night. Shortly after, the lights slowly appeared. There must have been dozens of the spheres. We sat and admired them awhile and then Charla sent me to bed. Before I fell asleep, I heard the front door open and then close with its distinctive creek and clunk. I slipped back into the living room and watched Charla among the lights that gracefully faded in and out. She lifted her arms and began to sway. Her eyes were closed, yet she responded to the illumination. Brightness shown from her face.

“They’re dancing,” I whispered.

So it went for several nights that summer: the lights luring Charla, the silhouette of the neighbor in her window, and the dance.